

TITLE OF ENTRY: BIOTECHNOLOGY IN AGRICULTURE: OPENING THE DOORS TO A NEW CONVERSATION

Agency: Ketchum

Client: Council for Biotechnology Information

Category: (8) Reputation / Brand Management - Associations

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Situation Analysis Skepticism is part of American culture and nothing conjures more skepticism than the term "GMO" or Genetically Modified Organism. Consumers trust little of what they hear from government, media and particularly large corporations. So when new technology, developed by the largest agricultural seed companies in the world, alters how farmers grow crops, there is a natural consumer reaction to ask, "why?" For years, questions about biotechnology in agriculture and genetically modified crops went unanswered as these seed companies focused on their primary audience – farmers – and let scientists communicate the safety of the technology. But farmers and scientists are not connected to mainstream media like special interest groups and activists. These communications miscalculations compounded over decades. Ketchum was engaged by the Council for Biotechnology Information (CBI - comprised of the six largest biotechnology companies) in the summer of 2013 to bridge this decades-old communications gap.

Timing was not coincidental. Activist voices had changed the narrative from the benefits of GMOs (less inputs, lower cost, more sustainable and better nutrition) to focus on **lack of transparency**, casting doubt on the entire field of study. Legislators stepped in as a reaction to constituents, and state labeling ballot measures began to pop up in 2013 (with 63% favorability according to our research). Mandatory labeling – associated with ingredients that are not known to have health risks – could halt research and development, and **the most promising agricultural technology in history may become economically unviable – all because skepticism went unaddressed.**

Ketchum created **GMO Answers**, a digital platform to embrace skepticism and physically represent an industry-wide mindset shift towards transparent communications. The site addresses long-overdue questions through a first-of-its-kind communications pipeline connecting consumers to seed companies, farmers, nutritionist and scientists. During the six-month soft launch phase concluded in December 2013, the site captured over 100,000 unique visitors, took in over 600 questions and directly addressed 400 of them, beginning to balance organic search results online (which had long skewed towards the activists), where the majority of consumers research GMOs. More importantly, GMO Answers recruited more than 100 experts to openly and transparently respond to consumer questions – tangible evidence of a new way of communicating with skeptical consumers.

OBJECTIVES

- Build and attract more than 60,000 visitors (10K/month) to an online destination that improves their understanding of GMOs
- Ensure 50% of visitors view the content as "credible" during soft launch (while acknowledging industry funding)
- Secure 50 balanced feature stories about biotechnology in top-tier media
- Secure placement within top 50 online search results for 20 most common questions about GMOs
- Answer at least 60% of questions posted to the site within 6 months of launch

STRATEGY

- Build a pipeline of experts to address consumer questions about biotechnology
- Embrace the term "GMO" – use the language that consumers use regardless of industry opposition
- Show transparency
- Be proactive, simple and emotional
- Put scientist, researcher and farmer voices in the lead
- Be easy for others to defend
- Show optimism for the future

RESEARCH / AUDIENCE ANALYSIS

Primary research identified the epicenter of consumer food conversation as a specific audience, the Food eVangelists:

- 11% of total population; 35M consumers
- Push opinions 4+ times per week via social and digital platforms
- Engaged in and lead food conversations, but not activists – they are "moveable"

Insight: The communications platform must find Food eVangelists where they are active – online and via social channels. And we must use Paid, Earned, Shared and Owned tools to reach them.

Ketchum engaged experts in message development to hone our communication. Dial-testing sessions with our target audience gauged responses to different themes. Results showed:

- Target audience does not respond to more science
Insight: Science must be combined with other voices to change the target's opinion
- Statements of "absolutes" are dismissed
Insight: Communication must acknowledge skepticism
- Messages aren't enough
Insight: Company messages lack credibility; actions matter

Benchmark testing also showed the challenging road ahead: 49% of target audience could not define a GMO; 45% had unfavorable opinions toward GMOs and 58% believe food produced with GMOs is less safe than other types of food

Insight: Opportunity for education to change the conversation